

The Rural-Urban Continuum

The rural-urban continuum allows one to go beyond the metro-nonmetro dichotomy and examine the diversity among rural areas in relation to the concentration of the older population. Counties show wider variation in the proportion of the older population than regions or States, with counties distinguished by type for metro counties and by size of urban population and adjacency to a metro area for nonmetro counties.

Places with larger populations that are closer to urban areas tend to have greater increases in their older population. All county types recorded an increase in their population age 60 and older between 1980 and

1990 (table 2). Metro counties had a greater rate of increase between 1980 and 1990 than nonmetro counties, with the highest rate of increase being in fringe counties of 1 million or more population (27 percent). Among nonmetro counties, the increase in the elderly population was greater for counties with larger urban populations: for counties in each urban population group, the increase was greater for those adjacent to metro counties. Thus, both local level of urbanization and metro status influence growth in the older population. Nonmetro adjacent counties with 20,000 or more urban population grew by 19 percent among the 60-and-older population, while in the most rural nonadjacent counties, the growth in the older population was 5 percent.

Table 2—Change in the population 60 and older and 85 and older by rural-urban continuum code, 1980-90
Growth of the older population is greater with an increase in size of place and proximity to urban areas

Rural-urban continuum code	Persons 60 years and older			Persons 85 years and older		
	1980	1990	Change, 1980-90	1980	1990	Change, 1980-90
	<i>Number</i>		<i>Percent</i>	<i>Number</i>		<i>Percent</i>
Total U.S.	35,633,190	41,831,037	17.4	2,192,679	3,003,328	37.0
Metro:						
1 million or more population—						
Central	15,522,520	17,997,510	15.9	930,154	1,267,309	36.2
Fringe	1,079,968	1,372,292	27.1	67,822	95,591	40.9
250,000 to 1 million population	7,387,220	9,174,773	24.2	440,065	630,159	43.2
Less than 250,000 population	2,775,078	3,387,093	22.1	173,593	244,933	41.1
Nonmetro:						
Urban population of 20,000 or more—						
Adjacent	1,485,491	1,759,778	18.5	91,627	125,760	37.3
Nonadjacent	918,478	1,073,309	16.9	60,814	80,358	32.1
Urban population of 2,500-19,999—						
Adjacent	2,848,179	3,184,948	11.8	188,358	245,776	30.5
Nonadjacent	2,384,237	2,572,324	7.9	158,657	208,656	31.5
Completely rural—						
Adjacent	473,115	513,948	8.6	30,213	39,678	31.3
Nonadjacent	758,904	795,062	4.8	51,376	65,108	26.7

Source: Calculated by ERS from data from the Bureau of the Census, 1980 and 1990 Census STF4 files.

Among the different county types, increases in the older population tend to have the same pattern as those observed in the general population. Urban proximity facilitates growth, as retirees move toward facilities and resources in urban areas as well as to places with amenities. Metro-nonmetro differences for older men and women are similar, with the percentage increase in the number of women, due to their longer life expectancy, always higher than for the number of men (appendix table 2).

The oldest old increased more rapidly (37 percent) than the older population (17 percent) between 1980 and 1990. The oldest old accounted for a larger share of the older population in 1990 than in 1980. In 1980, 6.3 percent were age 85 and older, increasing to 7.4 percent in 1990. By 1998, the Census Bureau's population estimates (independent of the CPS) showed an increase of 9 percent over 1990. Women outnumber men at advanced ages. The number of women age 85 and older increased more (43 percent) than the number of men (24 percent) between 1980 and 1990 (app. table 3). Again, the increase was greater in metro counties. In nonmetro counties, the more rural counties generally had a lesser rate of increase in the oldest old. At advanced ages, declining health, reduced income, and widowhood induce migration to urban areas where the necessary health and social services are located or where children of the elderly live (Siegel, 1993).

Women have a greater survival rate than men at all ages. At each incremental age over 60 years, women constitute a larger share of the population (fig. 3). In nonmetro areas, women represent 53 percent of the population age 60 to 64 and 63 percent of the population age 85 and older. Because women live longer than men, their health and economic status are quite vulnerable at later ages. The number of women in the upper ages slightly exceeds the number of men. In 1998, 8 percent of older women were 85 years and older, compared with 5 to 6 percent of men.

Evidence from the rural-urban continuum indicates that residence is an important variable affecting the size and age distribution of the older population. Metro and nonmetro counties differ in population size and density, geographic isolation, transportation systems, and economic base, as well as in the social and economic characteristics of the older residents. These characteristics are associated with different needs for health care delivery, transportation, recreation, and access to social services. Securing access to health care services presents a difficult problem for isolated, sparsely populated areas. Comprehensive, state-of-the-art medical care and facilities tend to be available only in large urban centers. Traveling long distances to these centers may be required and is often possible only for the younger or more affluent segment of the older nonmetro population.

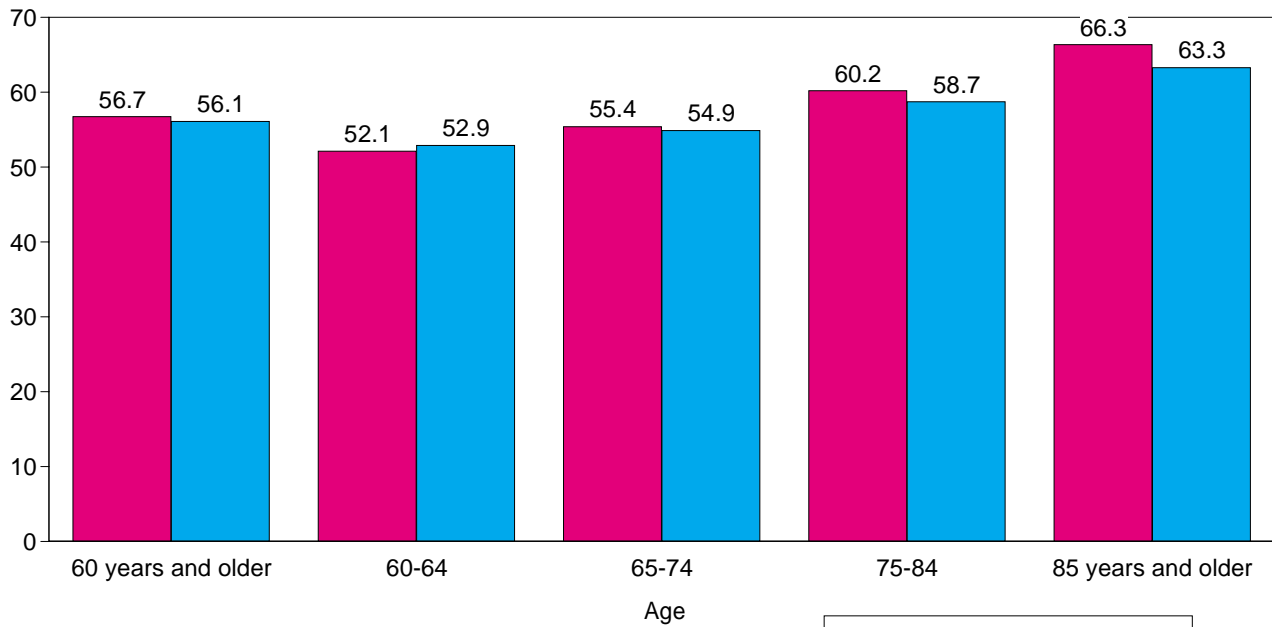
Needs of the elderly may be greater in remote and farm-dependent communities that have high and increasing shares of elderly as a result of the outmigration of young persons and aging-in-place. These areas have experienced the decline and departure of businesses and services, variability in farm incomes and farmland values, the erosion of the tax base, and reduced services for the elderly. Since the elderly in remote rural and farm-dependent communities tend to be older and poorer than those in retirement communities, the lack of local services can be a serious problem. Trends in the growth of the older population, especially the more rapid increase of the oldest old and the increasing proportion of older women at more advanced ages, are important factors to be considered in future community planning.

Figure 3

Older women as a percentage of the population by specific age group and residence, 1998

With advancing age, women constitute a larger share of the older population

Female share of population (percent)



Source: March 1998 Current Population Survey (CPS) data file.

Metro Nonmetro